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## Critique d'art

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# Robert Malaval

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Translator: Charles Penwarden



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## REFERENCES

*Robert Malaval*, Paris : Palais de Tokyo : Paris-Musées, 2005

- 1 “Why exhibit an artist who committed suicide in 1980 in a venue dedicate to emerging artists?” This is one of the questions asked in the preface to the catalogue accompanying the recent exhibition of Robert Malaval’s work at the Palais de Tokyo. The answer, according to the authors of the preamble, is that, in order to demonstrate the “dynamism of the French art scene”, it is necessary “to accept and promote its history, before going on to share it with the rest of the world.” The examples of Paul Thek and Bas Jan Ader are invoked here while the capacity of American art to periodically rewrite the narrative of its origins in accordance with current events is held up as a model.
- 2 Never mind that Bas Jan Ader, who admittedly lived in Los Angeles, was Dutch, and that the posthumous recognition of both his and Paul Thek’s art has been due mainly to the work of European galleries and institutions. What is problematic here is the idea, presented as self-evident, that History is periodically rewritten “in accordance with current events.” This assertion is questionable: for one thing, it assumes that there is a certain consensus about the period in question; for another, it runs the risk of putting the contemporary viewer in the position of a simple consumer in relation to artworks from before his time. From its opening pages, then, the catalogue of the Palais de Tokyo’s “first historical exhibition” will put any reader with a glimmer of critical awareness on his guard. Sadly, as one might have feared, this publication does not spare us the usual *clichés* about “rock culture” and excessive simplifications of art history. We are informed, for example—again by that preface—that “Malaval is one of the only artists of the 1960s and 70s, along with Richard Hamilton and Dan Graham, to have really integrated rock culture into his work in a way that goes beyond simple anecdote or imagery.” Putting aside the very peremptory tone of this statement, what is the viewer to make of the fact

that the whole catalogue sweeps him up in an almost continuous flow of precisely that: anecdote and imagery?

- 3 The first text, written by Jean-François Bizot, is like a kind of unpaginated prologue. Its “rawness”—it was originally published in 1980, not long after Malaval’s death—is thus put to the fore. However, looking beyond the perfectly honourable emotions that it still conveys, even today, the fact is, twenty-five years after it was written, that it is not much more than a mixture of indirect quotations, of general musings and sometimes dubious assertions (for example: “Nicolas de Staël, the last great abstract painter, committed suicide so as not to repeat himself”). Next comes the preface we have already referred to, followed by a commentary by Marc Sanchez on the exhibition itself. This event was unusual in that it was held simultaneously at the Palais de Tokyo and at the Biennale de Lyon (where part of a room was given over to Malaval). Sanchez tells us that the second part of this bipartite show was titled *La Couleur pure*. “The whole thing exudes a pleasure in painting and transparent happiness,” explained the curator in tones so subtly Matissonian that he seemed to have forgotten the strange connection he was suggesting with *La Couleur seule : l’expérience du monochrome*, an exhibition organised by the same Musée d’art contemporain in Lyon in 1988. It is Vincent Pécoil who gets to conclude the textual section of the catalogue, which he does with the cleverly titled essay, “Blanche generation”, a free half-translation of the famous Richard Hell song,
- 4 *Blank Generation*. The essay, too, is intelligent, and sets Malaval’s work in historical perspective. The juxtaposition of a photograph of the artist lying in bed in a flower-pattern shirt reading a comic book with a portrait painted by Adrian Piper while tripping on LSD is, for me, the visual highlight of the publication.
- 5 Finally, the illustrations, with reproductions of more than a hundred works punctuated by quotations from the artist. The black grounds on which the texts and documents are printed, the poor quality of the photolithography (particularly for the paintings made with sequins, which really are interesting) and the size of the characters in the titles all make this part of the book rather heavy going. Still, this impression is offset by the diversity of the materials and by the mixture of media presented here (paintings, drawings, sculpture, performance, photography). And the book does give a sense of this artist’s range, notably by presenting a number of little-known pieces, such as the very surprising drawings he made in India ink in the early 1960s.